

radical democracy

interview:

Alan Haber

founder and first president/
students for a democratic society
founder/meggido peace project

David Olson interviews Alan Haber

“The notion of the New Left as a movement of college activists dedicated to an ideal of democracy was, to a surprising extent, the creation of one man: (Robert) Alan Haber.”

Democracy is in the Streets, James Miller

Alan is a lifelong social justice and peace activist, and founder of Students for a Democratic Society [SDS], the largest and most influential student-based political organization of the 1960s. Alan recruited early SDS members, including Tom Hayden, and guided the collaborative process for producing *The Port Huron Statement*, considered the political manifesto of the New Left.

Not long after meeting Alan at an Occupy Ann Arbor General Assembly in September, 2011, I began to work with him on a project connected to the 50th anniversary of the Port Huron Statement at the University of Michigan.

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Alan Haber Interview

Our early conversations, and then digging through his archives, was the inspiration for the Radical Democracy Project.

The following interview is taken from several of our conversations. It has been edited and condensed for clarity.

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Radical Democracy: As we started going through your archives, I was surprised to see so many movement publications on policy, strategy, and specific issues like racism, economics, nuclear weapons... It was clear that in addition to the protests and demonstrations of the sixties, there had also been this serious, intellectual effort to create a new way forward that I didn't know anything about. It felt like getting a glimpse into a secret history that had been hidden from view.

Alan Haber: This collective material residue of the struggle as it has unfolded, when recapitulated from the perspective of victory, will be the material of our history. And it's with that view that I don't want to let anything go, because really this intention should all be realized.

Alan Haber Interview con't

RD: Going through all this material it becomes apparent that what at first might look like a myriad of struggles is in fact one movement, a trans-generational struggle that has been going on for a very long time.

AH: There is a continuity in the struggle. It's interesting that when we are in a moment of some action we think that it is all just happening now, but we are prepared in so many ways by what has come before.

I see that sitting amongst all these papers that I have somehow accumulated. They each carry a karmic trace — that is the way I like to think of it. There was an intention in producing this leaflet or that book or this manifesto, the same intention that animates people now. And even before there was the printing press, this same intention, this same idea, has animated people. It's the human struggle to be recognized, to have our voice, to put out our little intention through this leaflet or through this pamphlet or this book or this action or this button or this poster or this whatever.

And that's what people have been struggling for — against whoever is the tyrant or the demagogue, or ultimately the oppressor or limiter of our own freedom.

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Alan Haber Interview con't

RD: I started getting politicized during the Bush-Cheney years, when the lying and warmongering became too intense to ignore. But with Occupy I realized I was joining this bigger struggle: not only did the anti-Wall Street, anti-corporate oligarchy stance feel pitch-perfect to me, but I started to see that “continuity in the struggle.” Occupy was my entry point into the bigger picture.

AH: In the early 1960s, when I got into this, it was the Freedom Struggle in the South, the struggle against racism. Maybe had I gotten into it in 1895 it would have been the Suffrage Struggle, but it's the same struggle. **That's what radical democracy is: we want to change from some people being kept out of the democratic process to everybody in** Not have somebody on top of us, saying “This far but no further.” The whole system just stinks! It's the way this form of productivity produces poison and pollution and death of species, and essentially the rape of the earth — the same way the soldiers are raping in the army — and it needs a significant change.

As Dr. King said, it needs a change of values. He talked about militarism and racism. The way I have been putting it in my own little story, traced in all these papers stacked all around us, is that it is a war system.

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Alan Haber Interview con't

People ask, “Is this capitalism? Is this patriarchy?” Yes, it’s all that. It’s a war system, though, and somehow that war power rules us, and the rules we have inherited have been created by power — sometimes moral power, but usually by a gun or a sword or a bully of some sort to say, “Well, you subject of the Roman Republic, this is the way that it is.” And it’s time to change that.

This system of domination and hierarchy and top-dogism needs to be shifted out of war and towards peace. And what is a system of peace? It isn’t built on acquisition by force, but on sharing of all for all. Like some people say was once the normal way of humanity. Even in the bullishness of the caveman days was the sense that people sort of shared what was there — and that’s the principle of the commons.

RD: You’ve doing a lot of work on the commons, right here in Ann Arbor. Can you talk about the commons a little bit more?

AH: I’ve come to think that the question of the commons is really the unifying question of all struggles all over the world; that the bully, the privatizer, wants to take for his own what is really invested with community ownership. In the airwaves or the water or suchlike, but also in the knowledge that so many different minds have come to form any idea.

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Alan Haber Interview con't

So for someone to patent that idea and say, "This is ours," is just theft.

The anarchists used to say, "All property is theft." Maybe not all, but when you take for your own what should be available for everyone, it's a sick system.

RD: It seems like this system of exploitation, of taking what was once the people's and then selling it back to them, of endless war for profit, has become the norm in America. It's been accepted as natural, or somehow inevitable.

AH: This country has come to be ruled by mass murderers, economic rapists and run of the mill

psychopaths. They think they somehow have the righteous authority to kill at will. To snoop, to intervene, to subvert, to dominate and to impose their will where ever they like in the world. For oil, or coal or whatever the product is that they think they want, or we want or they want for us, or we want them to get for us, or whatever the deception is. They think they have the right to take everything. There has to be a change, because it's all everybody's. We've got to find a better way to share.

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Alan Haber Interview con't

RD: The idea of human beings sharing and taking care of each other seems straightforward enough, but at the same time a monumental task. How do we get there from here?

AH: That seems to be the idea Radical Democracy could advance: that **there is this whole wealth of knowledge from generations of struggle. If somehow people had a way of tapping into it, they could begin to see how it's all connected**, all these struggles around the world. While we feel weak in this country, there is at least some sense that something is going on. In Turkey, when the government says, "We're going to build a big building over your park," the people raise hell. Over here, the government says they're going to put a big building over our park and people are totally out to lunch. We could make the connection and realize, "Hey, the people in Turkey don't take this bullshit from the government, why should we?"

The international character of this shift is important. There was an old discussion in the socialist movement about over "one revolution" or "revolution in one country," and I've come to think this really needs to be a global, human shift of consciousness, a collective awakening. It's now possible through all this media.

Alan Haber Interview con't

You know, somebody can do a concert or a song, and everybody in the world knows about it. That opens a window that there is another world that everybody wants. Almost everybody, except the people saying, "It's mine, and every time you touch it you've got to pay me a toll."

RD: What gives you hope right now?

AH: What gives me hope is that we have never been stronger. Our networks are everywhere around the country. In every precinct, there are people touched by the Movement. All around the world there are struggles going on where people want us to get up off our ass.

And the amount of information that has been gathered, the experiments in participatory economics and human community, are one hundred thousand times greater than they were in 1960. The work that people have done has accumulated a body of knowledge that makes another world possible, and there are experienced people, technicians of social change schooled in the real world, that are able to make the change. We have a new government that could change the society, if we would just get our shit together. But can we do that? I'm not so sure, because people are still locked in their previous silos.

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Alan Haber Interview con't

RD: Since we first started talking, Trump won the election and changed the political landscape. Any insight on his victory, or what to expect?

AH: Trump is the bigger bully, the better bully, so of course he prevailed, and I can't say that I was completely surprised. He's got a dozen billionaires and a half a dozen generals running the government —we called that fascism back in Mussolini times, when we were precise about language. But now that we're "post-factual," it's just called business. Well, **business with an army is fascism**. America first, Israel first, whoever first... it's the same thing. It's fascism.

RD: I keep looking for silver linings... Trump's election gives us a clear and common enemy — maybe that will get more folks in the movement.

AH: Well, it should. There's trouble coming, and there will be defensive campaigns in every area. But we also need to think about what the offensive is for the next go around. And, so what is the program? Do we have a program for the farm? For energy, or an international program? Most importantly, what is our program for peace? We've got to end the war, meaning the whole system of war. We need to be planning the real program for 2020, and it's first showing would be in the 2018 elections.

Alan Haber Interview con't

My suggestion is that we don't run as a party. It should begin with the program. And that's our task now; to gather from all of the silos of movement consciousness and activism, and ask ourselves; Well, what needs to be your contribution the program? Then look to who are the actual experienced people that could be the implementers, which would create the collective for each of the departments of government.

RD: That seems to be one of the big next steps: collaboratively creating a People's Platform, or Program, from within the Movement. It's already happening in a sense, with the Vision for Black Lives, and now the statement from the Women's March on Washington. A group of millennial organizers put together a list of demands, too, and a common agenda is emerging. We can put our energy into discussing and creating that agenda, and build as much support as possible for it. If we can do that as a movement, the right candidates will show up.

AH: Exactly. Choosing a presidential candidate comes at the very end, once a program is formed. Only then do we decide who would represent this process and be accountable to the collectives and to the program.

Alan Haber Interview con't

RD: Are you hopeful we can move forward on all this right now?

AH: **What gives me hope is that we have never been stronger.** Our networks are everywhere around the country. In every precinct, there are people touched by the Movement. All around the world there are struggles going on where people want us to get up off our ass.

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RD: More people seem to realize that just thinking in terms of the two party system isn't enough, that we need systemic or radical change. That feels like a significant shift.

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Alan Haber Interview con't

AH: So many people now see that the Democratic Party Mr. Obama represents is not the party of a sustainable, green, peaceful, economy that is healing and caring and sharing, and lives like a civilized nation in the community of nations. That ain't Mr. Obama, sad to say, or Hillary, either. Nor the money or other interests that they have come to represent. We need a different system. We need a government that says, "This is our job." We need to put it before the people as a significant alternative choice. **Bernie**

Sanders is on the right track, but where's the global perspective? It needs to be conceived on a much wider basis, a fusion of multiple struggles to say, "Here is how we do it" — in education, energy welfare, health, military, economic conversion and all of the functions of government.

The possibility excites me. I thought we had a chance at the end of the Vietnam War to rally together a union of our political forces, which someone then translated as the Unlimited Network Integrating Our Nations, or UNION. And that someone then translated as the Unlimited Now: an unlimited network from all the people you touch, to the people they all touch, to the people they all touch, and all the people I touch, and they and they — a density of potential communication.

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Alan Haber Interview con't

If there were a series of reasonable messages: “Well, what is really important to you, David? Put your ideas onto the table.”

RD: It almost sounds like you're describing the Internet.

AH: Maybe I am! We are so divided by our pasts. Everybody comes from their parents and grandparents and so on. We each carry that history.

One of the phrases that returns to me is, “the blood of the fallen will be redeemed.” In the struggle, when people die for their cause, they cannot be forgotten. Those who know them will want to redeem their loss. And if their loss is by violence the intention tends to replicate the violence. But **what we need is for that redemption to be not through violence, but through transformation.** I think of it as the moral equivalent of revenge. I will not be still, I will not forget, I will not leave it as though it did not happen. But there has to be something that recognizes but doesn't replicate the violence.

Alan Haber Interview con't

That's sort of what Truth and Reconciliation was approaching in South Africa, when it let people tell just tell the truth, publicly. "Let it be said..." That's what we need here, like Chelsea Manning said, we need to let it all hang out. As it should.

We carry around the baggage of our sometimes violent pasts, but there is also the human union, and that's what the culture of peace and nonviolence will bring us closer to. Caring and sharing and understanding that we're all part of the same game — and the same mess.

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*This interview has been condensed and edited for clarity.
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